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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000003

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SUBJECT: SYRIAN REFORMER TELLS CODEL SPECTER THE
OPPOSITION'S EFFORTS FOR CHANGE

REF: 07 DAMASCUS 1170

Classified By: CDA Todd Holmstrom for reasons 1.4 b and d

11. (C) Summary. In a 45 minute meeting with Senator Specter and Representative Kennedy, Syrian opposition leader Riad Seif detailed the activities of the newly formed National Council, including the regime's arrest of seven of the Council's members; the types of coercion the SARG uses to silence its critics; and the importance of continued U.S. pressure on the regime to allow more domestic political freedom. Seif responded enthusiastically to the CODEL's suggestion that Specter and Kennedy mention publicly the assurance they received from President Asad that the seven detained National Council members had been released. End Summary.

12. (C) On December 30, 2007 Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA) and Representative Patrick Kennedy (D-RI) met with Syrian opposition leader, former political prisoner and former MP Riad Seif. Seif began by describing the basics of the newly formed National Council and subsequent arrest of seven of its most active members (reftel). Seif drew the CODEL's attention to the participation of several moderate Islamists in the group, such as the Movement for Justice and Development. Seif reiterated how important it was to include moderate Islamists to counteract the attraction of radical Islam. Seif noted that among those arrested, two had a great deal of credibility in the eyes of politically-inclined Muslims in Syria: President of the National Council Fidaa Hourani, from Hama, and Jaber al-Shoufi of As-Suweida.

13. (C) Seif said the National Council had been founded on December 1 when 163 members met in his house. Seif also touched briefly on the make-up, depth and breadth of the Damascus Declaration, the organization from which the National Council was formed. Seif said that the DD could garner hundreds of thousands of supporters but at the moment most remained silent due to the regime's severe repression of all types of political expression.

14. (C) At the CODEL's request Seif spoke on the different ways the regime repressed its critics, beginning with a discussion of the seven National Council members who were arrested following its founding. Seif agreed to Kennedy's suggestion to mention that President Asad had insisted the seven detainees had been released in a meeting earlier in the day.

15. (C) Seif also mentioned his battle with prostate cancer and how the regime would not let him travel outside the country for necessary treatment. Seif relayed the story of his son who disappeared after the security services had threatened him. Seif admitted the regime no longer tortured the more well-known dissidents but was severe in its treatment of individuals unknown to the international community. Now, the security services preferred to isolate high-profile dissidents from all contact with the outside world. Seif attributed the change in tactics more to increased international scrutiny thanks to the internet and satellite television than any real difference in the nature of the regime of Bashar versus Hafez al-Asad. Seif also reminded the CODEL that the security services consistently torture and otherwise victimize detainees who are not well-known.

16. (C) Regarding the best ways the U.S. could help the Syrian opposition, Seif said he appreciated public USG statements with regard to political prisoners but he stressed it was important to do more. Seif emphasized the U.S. should continue to pressure Syria to allow more freedom of expression and more civil society. Seif contended that even a slight political opening would lead to a mushrooming of democratic activity in Syria. He encouraged the U.S. to provide financial and media support to the offices the National Council has or plans to establish in Paris, Berlin, Washington and Canada. Finally, Seif advocated for U.S. help in establishing an NGO that would provide support to the families of the approximately 17,000 Syrians who have disappeared since the beginning of the Hafez al-Asad regime, and assist former prisoners who are now handicapped due to

DAMASCUS 00000003 002 OF 002

regime torture or mistreatment.

17. (C) CODEL Specter did not have an opportunity to clear this cable prior to departing Post.
HOLMSTROM